

# **WORLDVIEWS, RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND INTERFAITH READINESS:**

## **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY**

Prepared by

**Dr Lucy Peacock, Senior  
Research Fellow, Woolf  
Institute**

**Professor Mathew Guest,  
Professor of Sociology of  
Religion, Durham University**

**Professor Kristin Aune,  
Professor of Sociology of  
Religion, Coventry  
University**



# ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In this briefing, we present academic research that explores the relationships between UK university students' religious literacy, their experiences of religious education (RE) at school, and what we call their 'interfaith learning and development', a multidimensional concept representing students' ability to engage with, and relate across, religion and worldview difference. This research represents the first step in exploring how different types of RE might prepare students for the challenges of university and beyond, in which they are often faced with a variety of identities different from their own.

## The context

While research into religion in university life has been growing, little has been done to examine the transition between school and university. How are students' pre-university religious commitments challenged by campus life? How do the models of religion taught at school translate into the university experience, and how does the experience of school-based religious education (RE) prepare young people for the religious diversity of life during and beyond university? Debates about RE have in recent years revolved around proposals to change the curriculum from one based around world religions, to a Religion and Worldviews approach reflecting the more complex and fragmented range of orientations to religion within the contemporary UK, especially among younger generations. One angle yet to be addressed is how different styles of RE prepare young people for the challenges of a religiously diverse society. We are the first researchers to explore this question, and here we provide some answers to it.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose the following recommendations to RE professionals, school leaders, and policy makers:



## 01.

Recognise RE as a subject that is enriched by both learning factual information and attention to matters of perspective. Learning factual information about world religion and beliefs, and experiencing a Religion and Worldviews approach, have important social consequences for students in higher education settings.

## 03.

Plan teaching around a combination of different class-based methods. A Religion and Worldviews approach to RE influences students' ability to relate across religion and worldview difference upon entering university, but the evidence supports the value of a combination of engagement opportunities, those that are pedagogical in nature as well as reflective/interactive. Curriculum content and assessment methods must recognise the value of multiple learning experiences in equipping students to navigate the complexity of religious differences post-school.

## 02.

Resource and upskill in inter-worldview dialogue. Less than two thirds of our survey respondents felt that their worldviews were respected in the RE classroom; there is an urgent need for RE teacher training to prioritise dialogue facilitation skills in relation to exploring personal religious and non-religious worldviews.

## 04.

Take seriously the crucial role RE has to play in preparing young people for diverse society. All future RE curricula must be justified in relation to the potential benefits to pupils in preparing them for future encounters with religious diversity. Government must take seriously the central question of how RE plays a role in preparing young people for the experience of university and/or society more broadly, and the quality and consistency of RE provision must reflect this.



# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This briefing revolves around four key questions. A brief response to each is below.

## What are UK university students' levels of religious literacy and how do they relate to their prior experiences in the school RE classroom?

Framing 'religious literacy' as factual knowledge about the world religions, we found that just under a third of UK university students have 'low' levels of religious literacy, just under two thirds 'medium' levels, and just over one in ten 'high' levels. Various factors influence these patterns, including whether students had engaged in a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE at school. Two aspects of a Religion and Worldview approach – talking about your own religious or non-religious worldview, and learning to recognise diversity within religious and non-religious traditions – positively correlate with higher levels of factual knowledge about religion at university.

## Do students with higher levels of religious literacy show more evidence of interfaith learning at university?

Religious literacy is linked to important behavioural outcomes. Namely, university students with higher levels of religious literacy have a more developed ability to a) negotiate their own worldview commitments in relation to others who are different, b) proactively engage with others across a range of different worldviews, and c) develop positive attitudes towards those representing a variety of religion and worldview groups. Simply put, knowing more about religion makes young people better equipped to relate to others who are different from themselves while they are students at university.



# SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

## What aspects of a Religion and Worldviews approach do university students report experiencing in the school RE classroom?

Over half of the university students we surveyed said they engaged with a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE while at school, with proportions increasing as students study RE for longer. Among the reported experiences in the RE classroom, more students reported experiences of learning (e.g. 'I learnt that worldviews can be religious or non-religious'), than self-expression (e.g. 'I talked about my personal religious or non-religious worldview'). Less than two thirds of respondents felt their worldviews were respected in the RE classroom; research is needed to explore why this might be the case.

## Does a Religion and Worldviews approach to RE prepare students for the challenges of relating to others different from themselves at university?

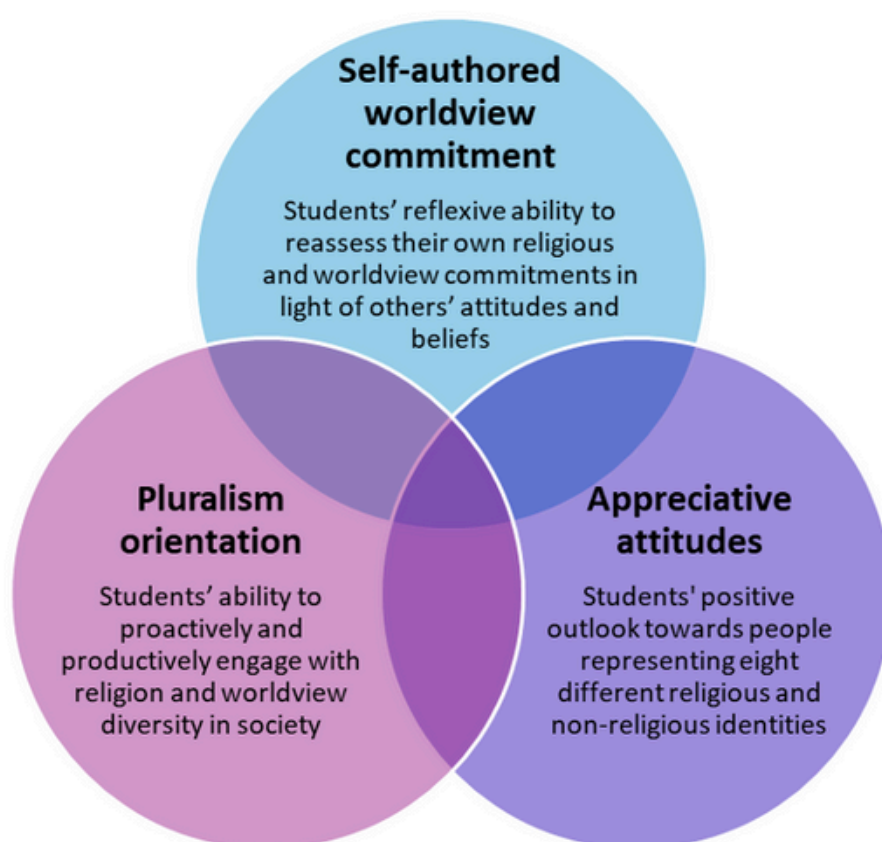
**Different aspects of a Religion and Worldviews approach in the RE classroom relate to distinct yet interlocking measures of 'interfaith readiness' upon entering university. In brief:**

- Students who talk about personal religious or non-religious worldviews in the RE classroom at school enter university with a greater reflexive ability to negotiate their own worldview commitments in relation to those who are different from themselves.
- Students enter university with a greater ability to constructively engage with questions of religion and worldview diversity in society if they report having: a) studied alongside RE classmates who hold a range of religious and non-religious worldviews, b) learnt during RE lessons that worldviews can be religious or non-religious, and c) learnt during RE lessons to recognise diversity within religious and non-religious traditions
- Students who learn during RE that religious and non-religious worldviews are shaped not just by tradition but by the choices people make enter university with higher levels of appreciation towards those holding a variety of different religious perspectives.

# RESEARCH METHODS

The research we present here formed part of the Building Positive Relationships among University Students across Religion and Worldview Diversity project, the UK's first national study of religion and worldview diversity among university students. We collected data through surveys, interviews, focus groups and observation between 2021 and 2023. This briefing is based on the project's survey data. We conducted two surveys covering 133 UK universities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Drawing on a nationally representative sample of students, 4,401 were surveyed in Autumn 2021 and 4,618 one year later. The findings presented here relate to survey analysis exploring the relationships between students' religious literacy, their experiences of RE at school, and what we call their 'interfaith learning and development' at university. We measured the latter by asking students to respond to 58 different statements. Their responses were used to classify their interfaith perspectives in terms of three concepts, visualised below.

***Figure 2: 'Interfaith learning and development': A multidimensional concept***





# FURTHER INFORMATION

For a longer briefing which presents the project's findings in greater detail, please visit [https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/80979133/Worldviews\\_religious\\_literacy\\_and\\_interfaith\\_readiness.pdf](https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/80979133/Worldviews_religious_literacy_and_interfaith_readiness.pdf).

For a short video of the researchers presenting a selection of key findings, please visit <https://www.reonline.org.uk/research/research-of-the-month/experience-of-school-based-re/>.

## Contact details:

Dr Lucy Peacock [lp347@cam.ac.uk](mailto:lp347@cam.ac.uk)

Professor Mathew Guest [m.j.guest@durham.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.guest@durham.ac.uk)

Professor Kristin Aune [kristin.aune@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:kristin.aune@coventry.ac.uk)